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The Liberal Arts in Contemporary American Society

GEORGE F. KENNAN

DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR

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The Liberal Arts in Contemporary American Society

by

GEORGE F. KENNAN
Former Ambassador to the Soviet Union

An Address delivered
at a Convocation of the University of Notre Dame on the
occasion of the dedication of the new I. A. O'Shaughnessy
Hall of Liberal and Fine Arts, South Bend, Indiana,
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The Liberal Arts in Contemporary American Society

I FIND IT DIFFICULT to begin these remarks without telling you how much it means to me to be here, in my native Middle West, and yet in just such a setting and for just such an occasion. One is always sensitive about one's native region, as one is about one's own family; and in the return to it one looks at it with eyes at once eagerly wistful and ruthlessly critical.

Nothing—I think—could be more warming and reassuring for the returning native son than the sight of this campus and the nature of this occasion. Cardinal Newman once said: "... A university ... is a place which wins the admiration of the young by its celebrity, kindles the affections of the middle aged by its beauty, and rivets the fidelity of the old by its associations." This observation causes me to feel today that I must be both young and old; because when I see this University and sense its life and spirit, I experience both the admiration and affection which Newman mentioned, and I understand well the bond of fidelity which such an institution creates in its own sons.

The sense of warmth and reassurance that flows from this occasion means all the more to me because I cannot forget that there are forces at large in our society today that do not inspire me with this same feeling—quite the contrary. These forces are too diffuse to be described by their association with the name

of any one man or any one political concept. They have no distinct organizational forms. They are as yet largely matters of the mind and the emotion in large masses of individuals. But they all march, in one way or another, under the banner of an alarmed and exercised anti-communism—but an anti-communism of a quite special variety, bearing an air of excited discovery and proprietorship, as though no one had ever known before that there was a communist danger, as though no one had ever thought about it and taken its measure, as though it had all begun about the year 1945 and these people were the first to learn of it.

I have no quarrel to pick with the ostensible purposes of the people in whom these forces are manifest. Surely, many of them are sincere. Surely, many of them are good people. Surely, many of them have come to these views under real provocation and out of real bewilderment. But I have the deepest misgivings about the direction and effects of their efforts. In general, I feel that what they are doing is unwise and unfortunate, and I am against it. They distort and exaggerate the dimensions of the problem with which they profess to deal. They confuse internal and external aspects of the communist threat. They insit on portraying as contemporary realities things that had their actuality years ago. They insist on ascribing to the workings of domestic communism evils and frustrations which, in so far as they were not part of the normal and unavoidable burden of complexity in our life, were the product of our behavior generally as a nation, and should today be the subject of humble and contrite soul-searching on the part of all of us, in a spirit of brotherhood and community, rather than of frantic and bitter recrimination. And having thus incorrectly stated the problem, it is no wonder that these people consistently find the wrong answers. They tell us to remove our eyes from the constructive

and positive purposes and to pursue with fanaticism the negative and vindictive ones. They sow timidity where there should be boldness; fear where there should be serenity; suspicion where there should be confidence and generosity. In this way they impel us—in the name of our salvation from the dangers of communism—to many of the habits of thought and action which our Soviet adversaries, I am sure, would most like to see us adopt and which they have tried unsuccessfully over a period of some thirty-five years to graft upon us through the operations of their communist party.

I would not mention these things if I felt that they were only my personal concern and had no relation to the undertaking which we have gathered today to celebrate. But I fear that there is here a serious relevance which we cannot ignore.

Thanks to the vision of wise and generous people, this University is now adding one more important unit to the number of those facilities in our country in which men can cultivate their own understanding, and extend the boundaries of knowledge, in the fields of arts and letters. Certainly there could be no finer undertaking, and none more needed. But I feel that this undertaking, too, will have to deal at some point with the forces I have just described—that by entering upon this undertaking you will eventually find that these forces will be your concern just as they have already become the concern of some of us who have walked in other paths of life.

I feel this first of all because these forces are narrowly exclusive in their approach to our world position, and carry this exclusiveness vigorously into the field of international cultural exchanges. They tend to stifle the interchange of cultural impulses that is vital to the progress of the intellectual and artistic life of our people. The people in question seem to feel either that cultural values are not important at all or that America has

reached the apex of cultural achievement and no longer needs in any serious way the stimulus of normal contact with other peoples in the field of arts and letters. They look with suspicion both on the sources of intellectual and artistic activity in this country and on impulses of this nature coming to us from abroad. The remote pasts of foreign artists and scholars are anxiously scanned before they are permitted to enter our land, and this is done in proceedings so indexible in concept and offensive in execution that their very existence often constitutes a discouragement to cultural interchange. The personal movements and affairs of great scholars and artists are thus passed upon and controlled by people who have no inkling of understanding for the creative work these same scholars and artists perform. In this way, we begin to draw about ourselves a cultural curtain similar in some respects to the iron curtain of our adversaries. In doing so, we tend to inflict upon ourselves a species of cultural isolation and provincialism wholly out of accord with the traditions of our nation and destined, if unchecked, to bring to our intellectual and artistic life the same sort of sterility from which the cultural world of our communist adversaries is already suffering.

A second reason why I think you will have to concern yourselves with the forces to which I have pointed is that within the framework of our society, as in its relations to external environment, the tendency of these forces is exclusive and intolerant—quick to reject, slow to receive, intent on discovering what ought *not* to be rather than what *ought* to be. They claim the right to define a certain area of our national life and cultural output as beyond the bounds of righteous approval. This definition is never effected by law or by constituted authority; it is effected by vague insinuation and suggestion. And the circle tends to grow constantly narrower. One has the impression that

if uncountered, these people would eventually reduce the area of political and cultural respectability to a point where it included only themselves, the excited accusers, and excluded everything and everybody not embraced in the profession of denunciation.

I recall reading recently, twice in one day, the words of individuals who proclaimed that if certain other people did not get up and join actively in the denunciation of communists or communism, they would thereby themselves be suspect. What sort of arrogance is this? Every one of us has his civic obligations. Every one of us has his moral obligations to the principles of loyalty and decency. I am not condoning any one for forgetting these obligations. But to go beyond this—to say that it is not enough to be a law-abiding citizen—to say that we all have some obligation to get up and make statements of this tenor or that with respect to other individuals, or else submit to being classified as suspect in the eyes of our fellow citizens —to assert this is to establish a new species of public ritual, to arrogate to one's individual self the powers of the spiritual and temporal law-giver, to make the definition of social conduct a matter of fear in the face of vague and irregular forces, rather than a matter of confidence in the protecting discipline of conscience and the law.

I would know of no moral or political authority for this sort of thing. I tremble when I see this attempt to make a semi-religious cult out of emotional political currents of the moment, and particularly when I note that these currents are ones exclusively negative in nature, designed to appeal only to men's capacity for hatred and fear, never to their capacity for forgiveness and charity and understanding. I have lived more than ten years of my life in totalitarian countries. I know where this sort of thing leads. I know it to be the most shocking and cynical

disservice one can do to the credulity and to the spiritual equilibrium of one's fellowmen.

And this sort of thing cannot fail to have its effect on the liberal arts, for it is associated with two things that stand in deepest conflict to the development of mind and spirit: with a crass materialism and anti-intellectualism on the one hand, and with a marked tendency toward standardization and conformity on the other.

In these forces I have spoken about, it seems to me that I detect a conscious rejection and ridicule of intellectual effort and distinction. They come together here with a deep-seated weakness in the American character: a certain shy self-consciousness that tends to deny interests other than those of business, sport, or war. There is a powerful strain of our American cast of mind that has little use for the artist or the writer, and professes to see in the pursuits of such people a lack of virility —as though virility could not find expression in the creation of beauty, as though Michaelango had never weilded his brush, as though Dante had never taken up his pen, as though the plays of Shakespeare were lacking in manliness. The bearers of this neo-materialism seem, indeed, to have a strange self-consciousness about the subject of virility—a strange need to emphasize and demonstrate it by exhibitions of taciturnity, callousness, and physical aggressiveness—as though there were some anxiety lest, in the absence of these exhibitions, it might be found wanting. What weakness is it in us Americans that so often makes us embarrassed or afraid to indulge the gentle impulse, to seek the finer and rarer flavor, to admit frankly and without stammering apologies to an appreciation for the wonder of the poet's word and the miracle of the artist's brush, for all the beauty, in short, that has been recorded in the images of word and line created by the hands of men in past ages? What is it

that makes us fear to acknowledge the greatness of other lands, or of other times, to shun the subtle and the unfamiliar? What is it that causes us to huddle together, herdlike, in tastes and enthusiasms that represent only the common denominator of popular acquiescence rather than to show ourselves receptive to the tremendous flights of creative imagination of which the individual mind has shown itself capable? Is it that we are forgetful of the true sources of our moral strength, afraid of ourselves, afraid to look into the chaos of our own breasts, afraid of the bright, penetrating light of the great teachers?

This fear of the untypical, this quest for security within the walls of secular uniformity—these are traits of our national character we would do well to beware of and to examine for their origins. They receive much encouragement these days, much automatic and unintended encouragement, by virtue of the growing standardization of the cultural and, in many respects, the educational influences to which our people are being subjected. The immense impact of commercial advertising and the mass media on our lives is—let us make no mistake about it—an impact that tends to encourage passivity, to encourage acquiescence and uniformity, to place handicaps on individual contemplativeness and creativeness.

It may not seem to many of us too dangerous that we should all live, dress, eat, hear, and read substantially alike. But we forget how easily this uniformity of thought and habit can be exploited, when the will to exploit it is there. We forget how easily it can slip over into the domination of our spiritual and political lives by self-appointed custodians who contrive to set themselves at the head of popular emotional currents.

There is a real and urgent danger here for anyone who values the right to differ from others in any manner whatsoever, be it in his interests or his associations or his faith. There is no greater

mistake we of this generation can make than to imagine that the tendencies which in other countries have led to the nightmare of totalitarianism will, as they appear in our own midst, politely pause—out of some delicate respect for American tradition—at the point where they would begin to affect our independence of mind and belief. The forces of intolerance and political demagoguery are greedy forces, and unrestrained. There is no limit to their ambitions or their impudence. They contain within themselves no mechanism of self-control. Like the ills of Pandora's box, once released, they can be stopped only by forces external to themselves.

It is for these reasons that I feel that you, in setting up at this time within this great academic community a center for liberal arts, are taking upon yourselves a great, though honorable, burden. You are going to have to swim against the tide of many of the things I have been talking about. You are frequently going to find arrayed against you, whether by intent or otherwise, the materialists, the anti-intellectuals, the chauvinists of all sizes and descriptions, the protagonists of violence and suspicion and intolerance, the people who take it upon themselves to delimit the operation of the principle of Christian charity, the people from whose memories there has passed the recollection that in their Father's house there are many mansions. What you do in these walls will often be unsettling and displeasing to such people. They will view it with jealousy. You will have to bear their malice and their misrepresentation. But, unlike what many of them profess to wish to do to their own chosen enemies, it will be your task not to destroy them but to help in their redemption and remaking, to open their eyes, to demonstrate to them the sterility and hoplessness of negative undertakings, to engender in them an awareness of the real glories and the real horizons of the human spirit.

In this lies both the duty and the opportunity of the devotees of the liberal arts within our contemporary American civilization. It lies with them to combat the standardization of our day: to teach people to accept the great richness of the human mind and fantasy—to welcome it and to rejoice in it, happy that we have not been condemned by Nature to a joyless monotony of the creative faculty, happy that there are so many marvelous ways in which the longings and dreams of men can find expression. It lies with the devotees of the liberal arts to combat the materialism of our time: to teach us how to ride to work in a motor vehicle and absorb the canned music of the advertisers without forgetting that there is also a music of the spheres, to force us to remember that all the manifestations of our material prowess, impressive as they seem, are nevertheless only impermanent auxiliaries to our existence—that the only permanent thing behind them all is still the naked, vulnerable, human soul, the scene of the age-old battle between good and evil, assailed with weakness and imperfections, always in need of help and support, and yet sometimes capable of such breathtaking impulses of faith and creative imagination.

Finally, it lies with the devotees of the liberal arts to combat the forces of intolerance in our society: to convince people that these forces are incompatible with the flowering of the human spirit, to remember that the ultimate judgments of good and evil are not ours to make: that the wrath of man against his fellow man must always be tempered by the recollection of his weakness and fallibility and by the example of forgiveness and redemption which is the essence of his Christian heritage.

I have tried to give you in these words a picture of the role of the liberal arts institution as I see it, and of its relation to the problems of our American civilization at this time. I assign to it in my thoughts, as you see, a duty and a function that could

hardly be more important. To those of you who are going to participate in the direction of this institution, and to those who are going to work within its sheltering and inspiring walls, I can only say that you have the deepest good wishes and the bated hopes of all of us who wish to see preserved the great qualities by which this nation has thus far been distinguished: its tolerance, its good nature, its decency, its health of spirit. May your accomplishments be worthy of your opportunities. May they give fruition to the excellent impulses that have made possible this beginning.

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June, 1953

(142) R

To Mr. Secretary

THE NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE
OFFICE OF THE COMMANDANT
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

for your

OFFICE
THE SECRETARY
DEPARTMENT OF STATE

24 April 1947

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My dear Mr. Acheson:

I have received your letter of April 18, and wish to assure you that I will be very glad to cooperate fully with you in your request that a portion of Mr. Kennan's time after May 1 be specifically allotted to State Department work. Your suggestion that he spend three days a week in the State Department is satisfactory, but after conferring with Mr. Kennan on this subject, I would suggest that his time be allocated so that he may spend Tuesday and Wednesday here and Monday, Thursday, and Friday at the State Department. Mr. Kennan concurs in this suggestion.

We thoroughly appreciate the problems confronting you in the State Department, and although we hate to release Mr. Kennan from his assignment here, we are glad to do it in order to permit him to head up the Department of State Planning Unit. I am glad that you are giving your personal attention to the question of his r lief, as I know your interest in the National War College and your realization of its importance in the training of military and Foreign Service officers who will be formulating national policy in the years to come.

With best regards, I am

Sincerely,

H. W. HILL
Vice Admiral, U. S. Navy
Commandant

The Honorable Dean Acheson
Acting Secretary of State
Department of State
Washington 25, D. C.

(143) R

April 18, 1947

Dear Admiral Hill:

With further reference to my letter to you of March 7 concerning Mr. Kennan's status, it has now been decided that the Department of State Planning Unit will be established as of May 1.

The Department has been making every effort to find a suitable candidate to fill the position of Deputy for Foreign Affairs after Mr. Kennan's departure, and still has this question actively in mind. However, it does not seem possible that anyone can be found to take over this work by May 1.

For this reason the question arises as to Mr. Kennan's status between May 1 and the rest of the academic year. He tells me that he already has one or two engagements in May which arise out of his work at the War College and that he would like to be able to continue to assist the War College at least in the most pressing matters that would normally call for his attention. For this reason, I wish to propose that a definite arrangement be made between the Department of State and the National War College concerning the allotment of his time subsequent to May 1. Specifically, it would be agreeable to the Department if he could be on duty here three days a week, namely Monday, Wednesday and Friday, from May 1 to June 30, inclusive, the remaining working days being available for service at the War College. Exceptions to this arrangement would be May 2, 12 and 16 respectively, on which dates he will be occupied with speaking engagements connected with his War College work.

I wish

Vice Admiral [illegible] Hill,
National War College,
Washington 25, D. C.

I wish to invite your attention in this respect to the following paragraph from General Gruenther's letter to Mr. Chapin of April 4, 1946 concerning Mr. Kennan's proposed assignment to the War College:

> "We foresee that his work during the first semester would be such that his continued presence at the National War College would be required. We should like very much that some arrangement be made whereby he would also be a member of our staff during the second semester although obviously the nature of the work will be such that his constant presence will not be necessary. We do feel that his background will be of considerable assistance to us during that part of the course when war plans are studied."

In view of this statement I trust that you will find the above proposal in the spirit of the original arrangements made for his service there. In any case, I should appreciate an early indication of your views on this subject.

Sincerely yours,

Acting Secretary

GKennan
S/S MA 4/17

145 R GFR

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
FOR THE PRESS

OCTOBER 3, 1952 NO. 777

The United States Government today received a note from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union stating that the Soviet Government considers Ambassador George F. Kennan as Persona Non Grata and requesting Mr. Kennan's immediate recall from the post of Ambassador of the United States of America in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Government in its note bases its request on the statement made on September 19 in Berlin by Mr. Kennan to representatives of the West Berlin press and American correspondents, which the Soviet Government characterized as "slanderous attacks hostile to the Soviet Union in rude violation of generally recognized norms of international law". The Government of the United States does not accept as valid the charges made by the Soviet Government.

Ambassador Kennan is recognized not only in this country but throughout the world as a man deeply versed in knowledge of the Soviet Union and sympathetic to the legitimate aspirations of the Russian peoples. There is no doubt that the request of the Soviet Government reflects their knowledge that the factual statement Ambassador Kennan made in Berlin on September 19 will be recognized in most parts of the world as a truthful one.

The reasons given by the Soviet Government for requesting the recall of Ambassador Kennan are that he has violated "generally recognized norms of international law". This comes from a Government which has itself, over a period of years, created practices in international intercourse which violate the traditions and customs of civilized peoples developed over generations, and which adversely affect efforts to maintain good relations with the Soviet Government. The Russian peoples themselves must be shamefully aware that foreigners within the Soviet Union are customarily treated by the Soviet Government in ways which are the exact contrary of civilized international usage. The violator of accepted usage is the Soviet Government, which has created the situation accurately described in Ambassador Kennan's Berlin statement.

The Soviet Government will be informed of this conclusion. Ambassador Kennan is now in Geneva. He will remain in Western Europe temporarily and will later return to Washington for consultation.

146 R GFK

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
FOR THE PRESS

OCTOBER 3, 1952 NO. 778

SOVIET NOTE REQUESTING RECALL OF AMBASSADOR KENNAN

Following is the unofficial English translation of a note handed today to John M. McSweeney, Counselor of the American Embassy at Moscow, by Andrei Vyshinsky, Soviet Foreign Minister, requesting the recall of Ambassador George Kennan:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics has the honor to inform the Government of the United States of America the following:

As is known the Ambassador of the United States of America in the USSR, Mr. Kennan, on September 19 at Tempelhof Airport in Berlin made a statement before representatives of the West Berlin press and American correspondents in which he made slanderous attacks hostile to the Soviet Union in a rude violation of generally recognized norms of international law. In this statement published in a number of West German papers Mr. Kennan allowed himself to compare the situation of Americans in Moscow with that which he allegedly experienced when in 1941-1942 he was interned by Nazis in Germany, and stated that "if the Nazis had permitted us to walk along the streets without the right to converse with any kind of German that would have been exactly the same situation in which we must live today in Moscow".

This statement of Mr. Kennan is completely false and hostile to the Soviet Union.

In view of the foregoing the Soviet Government considers it necessary to state that it considers Mr. Kennan as persona non grata and insists on Mr. Kennan's immediate recall from the post of the Ambassador of the United States of America in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

* * *

147 R GFK

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

FOR THE PRESS

OCTOBER 8, 1952 NO. 790

UNITED STATES NOTE OF OCTOBER 8 CONCERNING RECALL OF AMBASSADOR KENNAN

Following is the text of the United States reply to the Soviet Note of October 3 demanding the recall of Ambassador George Kennan which was delivered by the American Embassy at Moscow to the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs today:

"The receipt is acknowledged of the note of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of October 3 informing the United States Government that the Soviet Government considers Ambassador George F. Kennan as persona non grata and requesting Mr. Kennan's immediate recall. The Soviet Government in its note bases its attitude on statements made on September 19 by Ambassador Kennan in Berlin to representatives of the press which the Soviet Government characterizes as 'slanderous attacks hostile to the Soviet Union in gross violation of generally recognized norms of international law'.

"Ambassador Kennan's statement accurately and in moderate language described the position of foreign diplomats accredited to the Soviet Government. It is this treatment of diplomatic representatives, systematically applied over a period of years by the Soviet Government, which grossly violates the traditions and customs in international intercourse developed over generations.

"In the light of the above, the United States Government cannot accept the charges made by the Soviet Government as constituting valid reasons for acceding to the request for the recall of Ambassador Kennan."

* * *

148 R

November 12, 1953

Monday Dec. 16 G Kennan addressed staff.

Dear George:

We would like very much to have you appear before the Policy Planning Staff when you are again in Washington. If you can give us some advance notice of your coming, it would be helpful; but if you cannot, we shall assemble on short notice.

Mr. Bowie endorses this heartily and would like to have an individual talk with you as well.

Sincerely,

Carlton Savage
Acting
Executive Secretary

The Honorable
George F. Kennan,
Institute for Advanced Study,
Princeton, New Jersey.